

# NO GRASS GROWING UNDER

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At his post as the 35th Surgeon General of the Navy and Chief of the Navy's Bureau of Medicine and Surgery, Vice Admiral Don Arthur is all business. *[Incidentally, he's the first flight surgeon to hold this position.]* However, there's another side to him: He rides motorcycles, and I don't mean just around the block. This Northampton, Massachusetts, native logs a whopping 30,000 to 50,000 miles per year on a bike.

How? "If the Navy decides to send me down to Pensacola for a meeting, I ride my bike," he explained. "Next week, I'm riding out to Kansas City for a meeting. And I just rode to a meeting west of Ashville, North Carolina, last weekend, but that was a short trip—only 550 miles."

Besides these "business" trips, there are the "pleasure" trips. "Folks I know in the long-distance riding community set up fun activities," Admiral Arthur continued. "They have what are called RTE (ride-to-eat) events. They'll say, 'We're going to meet at such-and-such barbecue place in Alabama on Saturday night; meet us there.' We'll ride there, have dinner, then ride back home—whether it's Washington, D.C., Utah, or California—all in one weekend."

There also was a May 2002 U.S.A. Four-Corners Tour *[sponsored by the Southern California Motorcycling Association]*, in which Admiral Arthur touched all four corners of the United States. He rode his motorcycle from Madawaska, Maine, to Key West, Florida, to San Ysidro, California, to Blaine, Washington, before returning home—a distance of nearly 11,000 miles.

I had the privilege of interviewing this well-traveled 31-year Navy veteran on April 26, 2005, and learned that he's as dedicated to his avocation as he is to his vocation. His passion for motorcycles dates back to 1967, when he first learned to ride. "There were no courses that I knew of back then," said Admiral Arthur, "so I learned from a friend. I'd watch him ride, then he'd let me ride

his bike and tell me what to do as I went around the parking lot."

Once he had mastered the basics, he bought his first bike: a 450 Honda. "I only kept it a couple of months, though," he noted, "before I bought a full-dress Harley-Davidson, which I rode for many years." Admiral Arthur has owned more than a dozen motorcycles and currently has five.

When asked if he's ever had any close calls, Admiral Arthur responded, "I've had some closer-than-close calls—I've had a couple of accidents. My first one happened while I was working for Harley-Davidson as a mechanic—on April Fool's Day, 1973. I was riding a brand new bike to the shop when a car turned left directly in front of me. I had no reaction time at all. I spent the next four years on crutches and had a total of 10 operations and two knee replacements before they could put my left leg back together well enough to walk again."

Accordingly, Admiral Arthur has a healthy regard for motorcycle safety, starting with wearing a helmet. "I don't know if you can ride with a sense of personal responsibility unless you wear a helmet," he said. "In that earlier accident, my helmet actually was cracked in half. I still can remember the sound it made hitting the pavement as I fell from the bike. I also scratched up another helmet when a deer hit me *[during the May 2002 four-corners ride]*. Everyone in the touring-community family I ride with wears full riding gear. The helmets nearly always are full-face models. We've seen enough, know enough, have heard enough stories, and have had enough encounters of our own to realize if we want to continue riding, we have to wear appropriate gear, which includes a helmet."

It's little surprise that Admiral Arthur lectures to touring motorcycle groups on long-distance riding, riding safety, and riding preparation—that's what he did in Asheville one recent week-



# UNDER THESE WHEELS

end. "Throughout my presentations," he noted, "is a theme of 'here's how to ride safely'—here's the right equipment, the right way to set up your motorcycle, and the right way to ride so you don't get fatigued. I also explain how to recognize fatigue and what you should do if you have it: *Stop and rest!*"

When asked the biggest mistake he sees motorcyclists in general making today, Admiral Arthur quickly shot back, "Failure to appreciate

the dangers on the road. They don't look ahead and anticipate when a potentially dangerous situation is looming. They don't give that other hazard—whether it's a car, an animal, or a sharp curve—enough respect, enough latitude."

What advice does Admiral Arthur have for Sailors and Marines who ride motorcycles? "Take a motorcycle-safety course through the Motorcycle Safety Foundation. Every beginner should take the basic course; every experienced rider





should, at least every couple of years, take the experienced riders' course. The latter is only one day long, but it re-teaches you the fundamentals and better ingrains in you an awareness of other vehicles. It also helps you be a better motorcyclist—with better stopping, better turning, and better slow-speed handling capabilities.

"I'm glad I'm an instructor [*serves as a Rider-Coach at the Washington Navy Yard and also teaches occasionally at a community college*] because I regularly get to do all these things. When I wasn't an instructor, though, I took a course at least every other year to rebuild my skills. These refresher courses are especially valuable for those who live in the northern climes and who don't ride for several months during the winter. During the hiatus, you lose that muscle memory—that edge you had when you stopped riding in the fall."

Changing seasons, though, aren't the only thing that will cause motorcyclists to lose their riding edge. As Admiral Arthur explained, "A challenge we have in the Navy and Marine Corps is, of course, deployments. When we come back from one, I think we need to have the self-awareness

can enjoy now that they're older," he said. "When we're young, we enjoy the freedom of the road, and it doesn't matter where we go—just that we're on a motorcycle and with other people who also enjoy riding. Once we're older, we enjoy doing specific things, like touring and planning summer vacations to see the Grand Canyon or Yellowstone National Park. We may decide to get a National Parks pass so we can tour the many National Parks.

"There's more purpose, more direction in older riders; they tend to focus on family activities, whether it's a husband and wife riding two-up or each taking their separate bikes. One of the reasons we have so many more mature riders is that people are trying to enjoy their lives and not concentrate so much on work. There's a renewed interest in leisure activities. And, when these leisure activities involve long-distance riding, you need a large-capacity motorcycle—one that's heavy, that has enough power to get on the highway, and that's stable and comfortable."

While it's true more older riders are taking to the roadways today on motorcycles, Admiral

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that we can't just hop on our bikes and ride off down the street like we did before we left.

"Riding is an acquired skill—one that degrades over time if not used. We really need to get back into motorcycling by finding a parking lot so we can practice starting, stopping and weaving. We also need to work on re-learning to anticipate hazards—by looking ahead and thinking about the fact that we're on a motorcycle and vulnerable to the actions of others with whom we share the road. We know people are going to come into our lanes, and they're not going to see us, so we have to be able to protect ourselves."

As current statistics indicate, Admiral Arthur acknowledges there are a lot more mature riders—those over 40—on the roads today. However, he doesn't see these older people as trying to recapture their youth, and he doesn't see them as getting powerful motorcycles for the sake of power.

"I think these mature riders just are trying to take an activity they really enjoyed when they were younger and extend it into something they

Arthur points out there are also more women riders. "My daughter got her motorcycle license when she was 16 and rode one of my Harleys," he said. "Just yesterday, she bought her second motorcycle."

In his closing comments, Admiral Arthur focused on what we want in our Sailors and Marines. He said, "We want young, athletic people who aren't afraid to take risks ... to prosecute a military mission effectively. However, we don't want them to take risks in their personal lives. We must intelligently balance those two priorities.

"I hear a lot of people saying our Sailors and Marines shouldn't ride motorcycles at all because it's not safe. However, I don't think that's an effective way to look at it. I would rather commanding officers and others in authority say, 'If you choose to ride a motorcycle, let the Navy and Marine Corps help you be a better motorcyclist.' How do we do that? By getting more courses on the bases.

"One of the reasons we have trouble getting



training—and people ride off-base without it—is there aren't enough training quotas. We may get Draconian and say, 'You can't get a base permit without a course,' but that's not the right answer. That's just enforcement.

"The right answer is to encourage these young men and women to get the course by providing it more easily for them—give them the means to help them become safe riders. We do it with other things: We provide safety glasses and hearing protection for people in hazardous areas. Motorcycling is as much an occupational hazard. People are going to ride because it's fun, and they like doing it. I do it—and safely, I think. Am I putting myself at additional risk? Sure, but at a risk I'm trying to control as best I can by taking the proper safety measures while I'm riding, by preparing myself with the appropriate courses, and by keeping myself out of hazardous situations.

"Let's not force our people to keep their

motorcycles off base because they can't get a quota for the necessary course to bring the bikes on base. Instead, let's wake up to our responsibility to help our Sailors and Marines be safe.

"We need to respect all our people's choices—we respect their choices in jobs, lifestyles and many other areas, so why not respect their choices in sports avocations? I think you'll get better behavior from motorcyclists if you show them simple respect: Have motorcycle parking, or allow two or three motorcycles to park in the same space. These riders are individuals whom we want to keep in the Navy, so let's show them the same respect we show everyone else."

Whether you ride a motorcycle to save gas, because it's the only transportation you have, or, as in Admiral Arthur's case, "for the pure pleasure of doing it and the relaxation it affords," ride safely. Keep the shiny side up and the rubber side down. ■